

**The Business Elite: A Forgotten Force in the Civil Rights Movement,
Birmingham & Atlanta, 1960-1963**

Introduction

On May 15, 1961, the upcoming President of the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce, Sydney Smyer, was in Japan at a Rotary meeting, representing not only the United States, but also Birmingham. His trip however, was quickly ruined, when the *New York Times* published the front-page story that read, “Bi-Racial Buses Attacked, Riders Beaten in Alabama.” The story described the beatings in Anniston and Birmingham, Alabama, where the Freedom Riders stopped during their ride to test the desegregation orders of intrastate bus terminals. The men were greeted by “thirty to forty heavy-set men,” who beat them with “pipes, with key rings, and with fists.”¹ The story was published around the world, and Smyer was faced with worldwide criticism of his city.² He spent the rest of his time in Japan trying to salvage Birmingham’s reputation. These beatings launched the Chamber of Commerce into a two-year assault on Birmingham’s political leadership, in an attempt to curb the city’s suddenly tarnished reputation. The actions of the Chamber of Commerce and its members were vital in securing the removal of race mongers from public office and solidifying desegregation deals in downtown Birmingham.

Days earlier, the Freedom Riders passed through Atlanta, and were met with peace. There was no violence, and the city seemingly ignored the presence of volunteers. Mayor Hartsfield was in Washington, D.C. presenting President Kennedy with signed document from mayors across the nation who backed the President and his policies. Hartsfield claimed he “didn’t even know they [the Freedom Riders] were there,” and that Atlanta was a “great American city,” one

¹ “Bi-Racial Buses Attacked, Riders Beaten in Alabama,” *The New York Times*, May 15, 1961, 2.

² James Head, interviewed by Betty Hanson, June 30, 1995, BCRI Oral History Project, Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, Birmingham, Alabama.

that could not afford to get tied up in hate.³ Unlike Smyer, Hartsfield did not have to act so drastically because action had occurred decades prior to the Civil Rights Movement. By the 1940s, Atlanta was making token desegregation decisions, such as hiring black police officers. Atlanta would not have to make the sharp transition in public policy that leaders in Birmingham would have to make.

Birmingham and Atlanta had two vastly different tracks during the Civil Rights Movement. There are many explanations for why each city chose its respective route. One force however, was at the center of the debate prior to and during the Civil Rights Movement: the business community. These men were powerful members of the community, and often highly involved in politics. In each city, members of the business community were members of the city's Chamber of Commerce, attracting new business and jobs to Birmingham and Atlanta. The business community in each city however, responded differently to demands made by civil rights leaders, drastically influencing the course of the Civil Rights Movement. These decisions led to non-violence in Atlanta, and violence in Birmingham.

Understanding the course of events in the Civil Rights Movement is necessary to truly understand race relations in America. Often, our understanding of the Civil Rights Movement is based on incomplete knowledge, a loose idea of what happened, painted quickly in order to move onto the next topic. History classes focus on the great men and events in the Civil Rights Movement, failing to focus on the details. It is these details, however, that truly illustrate what occurred in the Civil Rights Movements. Although business leaders were acting more for

³ William Hartsfield, interviewed by WSB-TV, 25 May 1961, WSB-TV newsfilm collection, reel 0775, Walter J. Brown Media Archives and Peabody awards Collection, The University of Georgia Library, Athens, Georgia.

economic gain than racial equality, they clearly impacted the Movement in their cities. This focus is important for understanding the dynamics of the Civil Rights Movement in each city.

This study will compare Atlanta and Birmingham during four key years of the Civil Rights Movement: 1960-1963. First, I will spend time describing the cities before 1960. The political and social environment was not amicable to blacks in Atlanta or Birmingham, but the two cities still had completely different demographics and race relations. I will then focus on each city, and three important events: the Freedom Rides, school integration, and the desegregation of downtown businesses. Each of these events was unique, and each city experienced them differently. Finally, there will be a discussion on the implications of these events, and the impact they had on the Civil Rights Movement in Atlanta and Birmingham.

Businesses and the Civil Rights Movement

Several scholars have studied the relationship between businesses and the Civil Rights Movement. Joseph Luders addresses the economic motivation for business leaders to concede to basic movement demands, arguing business leaders accommodate protesters when disruption costs are higher than concession costs.⁴ Luders highlights the inaction of the iron and steel absentee owners in Birmingham because of their reliance on segregation; blacks were often used as strike breakers in union protests. Local business owners however, were not insulated from the economic effects of the Civil Rights Movement, and thus were the principal actors in desegregation. Luders argues that the disruption cost during the 1963 Birmingham campaign amounted to \$750,000/week, and that it was the motivation for business leader to capitulate to

⁴ Joseph Luders, "The Economics of Movement Success: Business Responses to Civil Rights Mobilization," *American Journal of Sociology* 111, 4 (2006): 963-98.

movement demands.⁵ James Cobb takes a broad overview of promoting economic progress in southern states, focusing on a broad range of cities, including both Atlanta and Birmingham.⁶ He argues cities in the South learned “the lesson of Little Rock,” that companies avoided states where violent confrontations could negatively affect profits, thus arming the economic progress of the city. Cobb asserts that many business and political leaders across the South saw segregation as a “moribund institution,” and thus were not willing to sacrifice economic progress in order to gain the reputation of cities such as Oxford and Little Rock.

Historians have also focused on race relations in both Atlanta and Birmingham. Glenn Eskew performs an in-depth study of Birmingham both locally and nationally, mapping the role of business leaders such as Sydney Smyer and David Vann.⁷ He focuses on the conflict between national and local leaders in Birmingham, as well as the clash between business and political leaders in the city. Aldon Morris also highlights the importance of the business community in Birmingham, but does not focus on the business leaders themselves.⁸ He instead focuses mainly on the plan to target businesses in Birmingham as a way to achieve desegregation. Morris argues civil rights leaders did not target Birmingham in the hopes to induce violence, but instead to cause economic disruption. This was a lesson learned in the Albany campaign, which focused on the overall community and failed to bring desegregation to the city.

⁵ Ibid, 985.

⁶ James Cobb, *The Selling of the South: The Southern Crusade for Industrial Development, 1936-1990* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press), 1993.

⁷ Glenn Eskew, *But For Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 1997.

⁸ Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press), 1984.

Several authors also focus on race in Atlanta. Ronald Bayor illustrates how race and politics shaped Atlanta.⁹ Bayor covers a broad range of issues, including urban renewal, highway construction, and healthcare. Bayor does not argue race is the only force shaping the city, just one major factor. He does show the serious inadequacies in black communities that existed prior to and during the Civil Rights Movement. The political leadership rarely addressed these issues unless it was pressured too. Kevin M. Kruse also discusses race relations in Atlanta during the Civil Rights Movement, focusing on the implications of “white flight” and how it shaped Atlanta and “modern conservatism.”¹⁰ Importantly, Kruse argues the political alliance between blacks and moderate whites was strictly political. While “reforms” were granted to the African American community, they were mainly token reforms that failed to make any substantial changes.

Previous literature illustrates the relationship between the business community and civil rights leaders. Business leaders often advocated for peaceful integration, involving themselves in desegregation discussions and deals. These decisions however, were not made because civil rights were suddenly a moral necessity or a natural right. Instead, desegregation was seen as an economic investment and a tool to promote growth. When the Civil Rights Movement threatened to halt economic prosperity, it forced business leaders to act on race relations. Little Rock illustrated to the business community that it would have to be proactive in stopping massive resistance to desegregation, or face the economic consequences.

⁹ Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth Century Atlanta* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 1996.

¹⁰ Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 2005.

Atlanta and Birmingham Before the Civil Rights Movement

Atlanta and Birmingham resided in two states with governments united against desegregation. All four of Alabama and Georgia's senators and nineteen of the Representatives signed the Southern Manifesto, a document denouncing the *Brown v. Board* decision and the "judicial encroachment" on state's rights.¹¹ Governors were outspoken against any desegregation efforts and steps towards voting rights, such as the abolition of the all-white primary, which occurred in 1944 in Texas, and eventually was applied to all states. By the time the Civil Rights Movement was in full force, men such as Ernest Vandiver and George Wallace were elected as governor on the promise of "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, and segregation forever." However, while the state leaders were united, local governments were more varied in their positions on the race issue. In Birmingham, politicians were free from pressure by the local business community and united with the governor to fight desegregation. Eugene "Bull" Connor actively fought integration, and had the overt support of leaders from U.S. Steel, which benefited from racial inequality. Atlanta officials, however, were fighting for the city's place on the national stage. Pressure from the business leaders often led to concessions by the government to promote peaceful race relations, making Atlanta a prosperous place to do business. This created an obvious dichotomy between the cities: Atlanta prioritized economic development and national importance, while Birmingham did not desire to enter the national stage as an economic leader.

Atlanta and Birmingham were two cities drastically transformed in the early 1900s. Figure 1 illustrates the population and income differences between the two cities. The 1960 Georgia census reported the population of the city just over one million, with whites equaling

¹¹ Congressional Record, 84th Congress Second Session. Vol. 102, part 4. Washington, D.C.: Governmental Printing Office, 1956. 4459-4460.

77% of the population and blacks making up almost 23% of the city.¹² In ten years, the population of Atlanta increased 40%.¹³ The urbanization of Atlanta led to a booming African American population and a swelling number of active movement groups, allowing blacks to apply pressure to the political and economic leadership in the city. Comparatively, the 1960 Alabama census described Birmingham, Alabama as an urbanized area, constituting of over 600,000 people, with 65% of the population was white, and 34% was African American.¹⁴ The median household income was \$5,103, and 25.8% was making below \$3,000.¹⁵ The same census recorded the Atlanta median income at \$5,844, and 20.6% making less than \$3,000 a year. The difference of between the two median incomes of Atlanta and Birmingham was \$741, and while it seems minor, which amounts to a difference of 15%.

Atlanta during the 1960s was a city transformed by a growing population, a bustling economy, and an evolving racial climate. On July 8, 1962, the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce estimated that around \$100 million had been invested in the Atlanta skyline, adding a dramatic increase in the number of skyscrapers in the city. Businesses such as the Georgia Power Company, the Bank of Georgia, and Citizens and Southern National Bank contributed massive buildings, some with ornate and decorative facades. Mayor Ivan Allen, Jr. and former Mayor William Hartsfield touted the growth, crediting “sound tax structure and good government” for the recent investment the city.¹⁶ Although Atlanta was known for its exploding economy, and

¹² *U.S. Census of Population, 1960: Georgia Volume I Part 2, Characteristics of the Population*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1963), 12-180.

¹³ *Ibid*, 12-60.

¹⁴ *U.S. Census of Population, 1960: Alabama Volume I Part 2, Characteristics of the Population*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1963.

¹⁵ *Ibid*.

¹⁶ “Boom Reshapes Atlanta Skyline; 100 Million Invested in 2 Years,” *The New York Times*, July 8, 1962.

was considered a beacon of progress, African Americans were still living in poverty and squalor. Most lived in poor, segregated communities, generally situated on the south side of Atlanta. Even in the 1950s, these communities lacked general necessities such as garbage pick-up, paved streets, and streetlights.¹⁷ Groups such as the Atlanta Urban League fought for urban renewal of South Atlanta, but the political leadership often spurned their reform efforts. The only reforms that were truly considered prior to the 1960s were in sanitation and health, which could affect whites living in the city. Even these reforms were often meager, since “high disease and death rates were usually blamed on blacks themselves.”¹⁸ This lack of attention created a strong desire for change in Atlanta, which took off along with the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s.

While African Americans lived in poverty in Atlanta, they lived in constant fear in Birmingham. In 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. described “Bull Connor’s Birmingham” as a city gripped by fear, where “brutality against negroes was an unquestioned and unchallenged reality.”¹⁹ He described a city that suffered the cold and calculated acts of racist men who attempted to keep the status quo, even if that meant violence against blacks and sympathetic whites. Along with violence, Bull’s Birmingham was filled with intimidation. When the commission system of government was challenged in 1962, the editor of Birmingham’s *Post Herald*, James E. Mills, wrote an editorial urging people to vote for the mayor-council system. After the commission system was defeated, Mills was arrested and charged with violating the Corrupt Practice Act, which denies the solicitation of votes on the day of an election. While Connor denied it, Mills strongly believed his arrest was politically motivated by the recently

¹⁷ Ronald H. Bayor, “The Civil Rights Movement as Urban Reform: Atlanta’s Black Neighborhoods and a New ‘Progressivism,’” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 77 (1993): 292.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 289.

¹⁹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can’t Wait* (New York: Signet Classic, 1963), 35.

deposed city commissioners.²⁰ Connor's Birmingham was a city fueled by fear and hatred, and it had yet to experience the most infamous actions of his long career in Birmingham politics.

Atlanta, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Civil Rights Movement

Atlanta was a city that was prepared to take a conciliatory stance towards civil rights demands. The city had began making token desegregation decisions in the early 1900s, with Mayor Hartsfield using his relationships with the business community, especially Robert Woodruff, to accomplish his goals. Atlanta leaders desired to move out of regional prominence and enter the national stage, which required non-violence in the Civil Rights Movement. When Hartsfield retired, he endorsed Ivan Allen, Jr., a business owner, former President of the Chamber of Commerce, and leader of the Community Chest. Allen, the first white politician to break the "gentleman's agreement" of not publically appealing to black voters, was someone who would continue to promote non-violence and peaceful desegregation, finishing the goals Hartsfield championed.²¹ This is illustrated in three different Movement campaigns: the Freedom Rides, school integration, and the desegregation of downtown businesses.

The Freedom Rides

The Freedom Rides was an attempt to test the recent Supreme Court decision *Boynton v. Virginia*.²² The Court ruled states could not segregate transportation stations participating in interstate commerce because the Interstate Commerce Act prohibited it. The Freedom Riders attempted to test this decision by traveling from Washington, D.C. down to New Orleans, Louisiana. The Freedom Riders consisted of non-violent student volunteers, trained by the

²⁰ Claude Sitton, "Alabama Editor is Facing Trial for Editorial," *The New York Times*, November 22, 1962, 19.

²¹ Ivan Allen Jr. Ivan, Interview by Ronald H. Bayor, July 29, 1985, *Ivan Allen, Jr. Digital Collection*, Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, Georgia.

²² *Boynton v. Virginia*, 364 U.S. 454

Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). The volunteers started in their trip in Washington, D.C. and moved down towards the Deep South. Atlanta was the last major stop, and the last peaceful stop the riders would encounter on their trip.

The Freedom Riders entered Atlanta on May 13, 1961 after the group passed through Athens and Augusta. The restaurant at the bus terminal was closed, but the students stayed peacefully in Atlanta, used the restrooms, and received shoeshines together.²³ The following day, Mother's Day, the rider's departed for Alabama. While there was no national coverage, local newspapers such as the *Atlanta Journal* and the *Atlanta Constitution* praised Atlanta's citizens for being a model for the South.²⁴ Mayor Hartsfield commented to a reporter in Washington, where he had just met with President Kennedy, that he did not even know the Freedom Riders were there, and that Atlanta was not going to get involved in hate, because "it takes time to hate...and we don't hate anyone."²⁵ Hartsfield also commented that level heads prevailed in keeping Atlanta peaceful.²⁶ Non-violent events such as these were touted by business leaders and elected officials, especially after Alabama fell under harsh criticism when the Freedom Rides exploded in Birmingham.

School Desegregation

School desegregation in Atlanta, compared to other Southern Cities, was relatively quiet on the national stage. While there was a great internal battle occurring on the local stage, the lack of violence failed to bring national press coverage. Although Governor Vandiver had been

²³ Eugene Patterson, "Riders Had No Trouble In Georgia," *Atlanta Constitution*, 15 May 1961, 8.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ William Hartsfield, interviewed by WSB-TV, 25 May 1961, WSB-TV newsfilm collection, reel 0775, Walter J. Brown Media Archives and Peabody awards Collection, The University of Georgia Library, Athens, Georgia.

²⁶ William Hartsfield, WSB-TV, May 25, 1961.

elected on the promise of maintaining segregation, it seemed unlikely he would be able to keep his promise. Business leaders had observed what happened in Little Rock, Arkansas, and were determined to ward off a downward economic spiral. Arkansas, before the integration debacle, was experiencing an economic boom. After Arkansas closed its public schools, the city failed to attract any new business, and local leaders warned the nation of the perils of resistance.²⁷ In order to avoid the political ramifications of failing to close the schools, Governor Vandiver appointed a commission to decide how the state would move forward. Commonly known as the “Sibley Commission,” the committee was led by John Sibley, an Atlanta lawyer and businessman.²⁸ Sibley however, was not the only Atlanta businessman involved in the discussions. Atlanta businessmen stood strongly behind groups such as HOPE (Help Our Public Education, Inc.), which fought to keep the public schools open. While this group and its supporters were not seeking equality, it strongly believed the school and race issues needed to be separated. This gained the support of businessmen who were not interested in equal rights, but wanted to keep the race issue in Atlanta quiet. The Sibley Commission eventually decided Georgia should keep its public schools open and avoid massive resistance. Sibley argued massive resistance would only give support to “race agitators” and slow economic growth.²⁹ Atlanta business leaders latched onto this argument, eventually exerting influence throughout the state in support of keeping public schools open.

²⁷ Jeff Roche, *Restructured Resistance: The Sibley Commission and the Politics of Desegregation in Georgia* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1998), 66.

²⁸ Ernest Vandiver, Interviewed by Clifford Kuhn, 25 January 1994, P1994-02, Series A. Georgia Governors, Georgia Government Documentation Project, Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State Library, Atlanta.

²⁹ Roche, 58-64.

Once the state decided it would not shut down the public schools, token integration moved quickly. Nine African Americans integrated four previously all-white public schools across the city, with the cooperation of the school system, police, and local leaders. The schools chosen were meant to avoid the “class issue,” and included Brown, Grady, Murphy, and Northside.³⁰ Police were on hand to prevent violence, and political leaders spoke out readily for the need for peaceful integration. Business leaders such as Ralph McGill and Mills B. Lane spoke out for acceptance of integration, often using influence to obtain their desired outcome. These leaders however, were often pragmatic about school desegregation. Police Chief Herbert Jenkins stated he believed in school segregation, but recognized the importance of maintaining law and order, and former Mayor Hartsfield declared peaceful school integration was needed to maintain Atlanta’s “good reputation.”³¹

Desegregation of Downtown Businesses

The desegregation of downtown stores, hotels, and restaurants was a process championed by the business community, without the city government needing to get involved. Atlanta, along with most major cities in South, had experienced major protests in its predominantly white downtown areas. Unlike most cities in the South however, voluntary desegregation began in 1961. Boycotts began in November 1960, and in December the Chamber of Commerce refused to meet with African American leaders to end the sit-ins. It was not until March 1961 that the Chamber of Commerce and Movement leaders reached an accord, which would end desegregation at lunch counters in September, when schools were to be integrated.³² After this

³⁰ Claude Sitton, “Atlanta Optimistic as Four Schools Prepare to Integrate This Week,” *The New York Times*, August 27, 1961.

³¹ Claude Sitton, “Atlanta Schools Set to Integrate,” *The New York Times*, July 2, 1961.

³² “Atlanta’s Sit-Ins Ended by Accord,” *The New York Times*, March 8, 1961.

deal was reached, desegregation began to fall quickly in Atlanta. Restaurants, schools, stores, and hospitals began desegregating, and by 1963, the Atlanta Junior Chamber of Commerce named an African American as one of its five “Outstanding Men of the Year.”³³ The Chamber of Commerce continued to push for desegregation in 1963, asking “all businesses soliciting business from the general public to do so without regard to race, color or creed.”³⁴

Along with the Chamber of Commerce, other local businessmen promoted desegregation. Ralph McGill, the liberal editor of *The Atlanta Constitution* published constant anti-segregation editorials on the front page of the newspaper. His editorials were both critical and proud, at one point praising the city of Atlanta for not “experimenting with ignorance,” as Louisiana had with its anti-integration legislation.³⁵ Mayor Allen was the only Southern mayor to speak before the Committee on Commerce in the U.S. Senate in support of civil rights for blacks. Allen described the voluntary actions Atlanta business leaders took, from the voluntary desegregation of restaurants and hotels to the abolishment of separate job listings for blacks and whites. He supported a civil rights bill that would require businesses to serve African Americans, claiming it would give guidance and clarity to local governments. In his testimony, Mayor Allen constantly praised local Atlanta businesses for taking voluntary action, while “hundreds of communities and cities...have not ever addressed themselves to the issue.”³⁶ However, despite his support of the Civil Rights Act, he was still believed local communities and businesses should have time before

³³ Race Relations- Report, 1963, Box 2 Folder 42, Annie L. McPheeters papers. Archives Division, Auburn Avenue Research Library on African-American Culture and History, Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System.

³⁴ “Pools in Atlanta to Be Integrated: Chamber Urges Businesses to Drop Racial Barriers,” *The New York Times*, May 30, 1963.

³⁵ Ralph McGill, “Experimenting with Ignorance,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 1961.

³⁶ *Hearing Before the Committee on Commerce*, S. 1732, Civil Rights Act of 1964, day 10, July 26, 1963, 866.

the law would go into effect. He supported a plan that would give metropolitan areas twelve to twenty-four months to work out racial injustices before the bill was imposed, allowing businesses to “solve” the problem of racial discrimination themselves.

Birmingham, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Civil Rights Movement

Unlike Atlanta, Birmingham was on a path towards massive resistance. It’s local business community as a whole did not desire to involve itself with civil rights. National business leaders such as U.S. Steel, however, were supporting politicians who would enforce the racial status quo. U.S. Steel benefited from segregation, because they could employ blacks as strike-breakers during the whites-only union strikes, and also as a bargaining method during wage negotiations. The local business and political leaders often ostracized those who did speak up for integration, such as Charles F. Zukoski, who was one of the few outspoken business leaders during the 1950s and 1960s.³⁷ This combination of support and disinterest allowed for resistance to take place in the form of violence, which is illustrated by the Freedom Rides, school integration, and the desegregation of downtown businesses.

The Freedom Rides

The Freedom Rides in Birmingham put the city on the map as a racially turbulent area, fueled by hate. The Freedom Riders entered Alabama on May 14, 1961. Upon the bus’s arrival in Birmingham, violence erupted, despite pleas to police commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor for a police presence. The Klu Klux Klan however, knowing there would be no police, waited all day

³⁷ Charles Zukoski, interviewed by Lamonte, May 13, 1994, BCRI Oral History Project, Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, Birmingham, Alabama.

for the students with pipes, chains, and bats.³⁸ Klan members beat not only the Freedom Riders but also non-affiliated bus passengers, reporters, and local citizens. When the police finally showed up, the attackers had moved down the street, where one witness said they could be heard “discussing their ‘achievements’ of the day...right under Police Commissioner [Eugene] Connor’s window.”³⁹ The incident was a source of shame for moderate Birmingham citizens, and the final straw for local business leaders. The attacks in Birmingham received international press coverage, and caused severe embarrassment for Sidney Smyer, the incoming president of Birmingham’s Chamber of Commerce, who was abroad for a Rotary meeting. This was the moment that launched the “dethroning” of Connor and the start of a new era of influence for the business community in Birmingham.⁴⁰

When Smyer returned home to Birmingham, he and the Chamber of Commerce set up the Senior Citizens Committee, consisting of the top CEO’s from local businesses in Birmingham. This committee had the Birmingham Bar Association perform a study to determine which style of government would be most beneficial to the city of Birmingham. When the Bar Association decided on the mayor-council system, the Chamber of Commerce created a petition and circulated it among “500 anybodies” to collect signatures at polling stations on the day of a special election for the Alabama state legislature. Since Connor successfully thwarted the first petition attempt by seizing signatures, the Chamber had someone drive to each polling station and collect the signatures every hour.⁴¹ On this day, almost 12,000 names were collected,

³⁸ David Vann, Interview conducted by Blackside, Inc. November 1, 1985, *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

³⁹ “Bi-Racial Buses Attacked, Riders Beaten in Alabama,” 2.

⁴⁰ Head, 7.

⁴¹ Vann, 10-14.

securing the recall election for a new mayor-council system. Despite Connor's outrage, a probate judge called for an election, after Mayor Hanes refused to call for the election.⁴² The election resulted in a new Mayor, Albert Boutwell, a moderate segregationist who believed the city was "in the grip of political leaders who discouraged growth."⁴³ Connor and the other members of the city commission challenged the ruling, and it was not until May 23, 1963 that Boutwell and the newly elected councilmen were able to serve without the interference from Connor and the other commissioners. While Albert Boutwell, was a segregationist, he was not the "fire hose and police dog variety."⁴⁴ Boutwell's language made it obvious however, he was not fighting for equal rights, but a peaceful image of Birmingham, a "harmonious solution to all of the problems."⁴⁵ Although supported by the business community because of his moderate beliefs, Boutwell still outwardly supported desegregation and often spoke against deals forged by the Chamber of Commerce.

School Integration

School integration took a different course in Birmingham than it did in Atlanta. Birmingham city officials actively fought the desegregation of the city's public schools in court, not on the streets. The Birmingham Campaign, which was the protest launched by Movement leaders in 1963 that erupted in violence, focused on downtown businesses and not education. Despite several delay tactics and failed desegregation plans, the Birmingham Board of Education

⁴² Vann, 15-16.

⁴³ "Birmingham Vote Ends Long Rule," *The New York Times*, April 4, 1963, 24.

⁴⁴ Claude Sitton, "Boutwell seated in Birmingham; Peace Hopes Rise," *The New York Times*, May 24, 1963, 1.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

proposed a plan that would desegregate the twelfth grade in one Birmingham school.⁴⁶ The decision however, was surrounded by heavy controversy, as Governor George C. Wallace decided instead to close the schools. Despite appeals by local officials, Wallace blocked African Americans from entering the school, only to open the schools a few days later. It was not until 1964 that the courts forced Wallace to stand aside and let the integration process continue in Alabama.⁴⁷

Although school desegregation in Birmingham was not violent, it still received negative national press coverage. Compared to other events in Birmingham however, this was an attempt by the city to finally begin token desegregation, and it was met with defiance on the state level. The *New York Times* described the conflict between Wallace, who wanted to keep the schools closed, and education officials, who wanted to reopen the schools, as obvious and frustrating.⁴⁸ Business leaders in Birmingham however, were not focused on school integration, but the desegregation of downtown stores. Unfortunately for the city, the lack of commitment to the school issue created another publicity problem, and another crisis business leaders would have to address.

Downtown Desegregation

The desegregation of downtown Birmingham was a long and brutal process. After the attacks on the Freedom Riders, all eyes were on the city. Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth launched boycotts in 1962, and by 1963 they developed into large-scale protests in the heart of downtown Birmingham. The original boycotts not only hurt the profits of local business, it also brought

⁴⁶ Claude Sitton, "Wallace to Let Schools Reopen in Four Cities Today," *The New York Times*, September 9, 1963.

⁴⁷ "Alabama Blocked on School Stand," *The New York Times*, July 14, 1964.

⁴⁸ Claude Sitton, "Wallace to Let Schools Reopen in Four Cities Today."

them to the desegregation bargaining table. Connor's government made multiple attempts to end the boycotts early, and even cutting-off city funding to the county's food surplus program, which provided food to poor county residents. The decision was made because a majority of those on the program were black.⁴⁹ Eventually, King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference joined the boycotts and launched its Birmingham Campaign. Eventually, children joined the protest, and Connor began arresting hundreds and using police dogs and fire hoses to "control" the crowds. The violence produced iconic images, and an immense amount of bad press to the city. This quickly began to affect the profit margins of businesses in downtown Birmingham, with the *New York Times* reporting sales down 15% in a four-week period.⁵⁰ The violence wielded on the non-violent protesters effectively pressured businessmen into serious desegregation discussions. While these men had always been actively involved in the race issue after the Freedom Rides, the 1963 boycotts forced the business community to finally act on previous discussions.

Although business leaders began desegregation discussions in 1962, before the boycotts became violent, they failed month after month. Men such as Sydney Smyer and David Vann led the white business community in discussions with leaders of the black community. The multi-racial group consisted of bankers, real estate brokers, lawyers, and businessmen. It was the violence, however, that pushed the discussions forward. As violence increased, Smyer tried to hasten the talks by inviting Reverend Shuttlesworth, the local leader of the Birmingham Campaign, into the meeting, noting his leadership skills with the black community. At this point, both white and black leaders moderated their demands in order to obtain an agreement. This

⁴⁹ "Negroes' Boycott Fought in the South: Birmingham Cuts Off Funds to Surplus Food Program," *The New York Times*, April 4, 1962.

⁵⁰ Jack Angguth, "Birmingham Loss in Stores Widens," *The New York Times*, May 18, 1963.

“moderate” desegregation plan, announced by Smyer, included the promise of desegregated stores and restaurants, hiring of black workers, and the formation of a biracial committee to address problems in the city. The agreement also included the release of the African Americans jailed during the protests.⁵¹ However, the negotiations excluded both the newly elected Mayor Boutwell and Commissioner Conner. The two, locked in a legal fight to determine when the newly elected leaders would take over the city, were kept out of discussions. When Commissioner Connor was informed of the talks, he threatened a “counter-boycott” if stores peacefully desegregated. When Mayor Boutwell was informed of the discussion, he told the press that he was not bound to the negotiations, and would make his decision at a later date.⁵² Eventually, Boutwell accepted the negotiations and appointed a biracial council to seek advice on the “economic and social welfare of the city.” The council consisted of several prominent businessmen from the black and white community.⁵³

Birmingham’s experience in the Civil Rights Movement was filled with violence, causing it to become one of the most notorious cities in America. In each major event, the Freedom Rides, school integration, and the desegregation of downtown, there was a negative and often violent conflict. Originally, business leaders were uninterested in civil rights issues. However, the business community became involved when government officials began encouraging and causing violence. This was mainly because such intense violence was negatively impacting the local business community, but business leaders were often clamoring to reverse the damage, as opposed to preventing it.

⁵¹ Claude Sitton, “Birmingham Pact Sets Timetable for Integration,” *The New York Times*, May 11, 1963.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Foster Hailey, “Birmingham Gets Biracial Council,” *The New York Times*, July 17, 1963.

Discussion and Conclusion

The business communities in Atlanta and Birmingham could not have responded more differently to issue of civil rights. The most apparent difference between the two cities is the timing of communities' actions. For decades, Atlanta officials had been proponents of racial moderation. Business leaders, especially after the crisis in Little Rock, were determined to continue this policy of moderation and act before conflicts arose. As James Cobb highlights, business leaders were not willing to prolong dying institution at the expense of economic growth.⁵⁴ Atlanta still had the same protests other cities across America experienced, but business leaders were proactive in preventing violent conflict. Business leaders in Birmingham, by contrast, were constantly forced into responding after a crisis. The Freedom Rides and the Birmingham Campaign are examples of two devastating blows for the business community in Birmingham, but business leaders failed to make substantial moves between the two events to ward off frustrations and violence. Even when the elected officials attempted to act on a court desegregation order, Governor Wallace intruded on the city and made national headlines.

Governor Wallace's intrusion also illustrates another major difference between the two cities. Atlanta's business leaders had major clout with both city and state officials. On the local level, Mayor Allen was deeply involved with the Chamber of Commerce before his election. He was the president of the Chamber, and before that he was the president of the Chamber's Community Chest, which controlled the funding of the organization. Allen also had deep ties to Robert Woodruff, frequently seeking his advice on political and personal matters. Woodruff, the CEO of Coca-Cola, was considered the most powerful man in Atlanta. Allen constantly sought Woodruff's advice during his tenure as Mayor, a relationship that began when Allen was still

⁵⁴ Cobb, 150.

running his father's business. Allen was connected with other business leaders as well, who helped fund and promote his campaign. Mills B. Lane was a major promoter of Ivan Allen, and often signed their correspondence, "I can be governed entirely at your wishes."⁵⁵ His ties to the business community were obvious when he testified before the Senate in favor of a civil rights act. During his testimony, he lay most of the progress achieved at the feet of business leaders, not city officials. Woodruff and Allen also had strong relationships with Ralph McGill and editors at the *Atlanta Constitution*, which tirelessly promoted the Mayor's goals to the general public.⁵⁶ The ties to Georgia's Governor were illustrated when Governor Vandiver accepted the recommendation of the Sibley Commission, which was led and supported by Atlanta businessmen. Unlike Wallace, Vandiver was also committed to keeping federal troops out of Georgia, which meant no violence could break out around school integration.⁵⁷

Comparatively, Birmingham's business leaders did not have the same clout with state officials. Business leaders were unable to convince Commissioner Connor to step aside or moderate his actions, leading to an explosion with the 1963 protests. Unlike Atlanta, the two were making decisions separately instead of working together. Commissioner Connor was the man of the "working class," whose supporters often came from poor, white, working class districts. His personal papers are littered with encouragements and promises from Birmingham citizens to fight segregation. Lacking in his personal papers however, is support and

⁵⁵ Letter from Mills B. Lane to Ivan Allen, Jr., Allen Family Papers, Box 2.438 Folder 6, The Atlanta History Center.

⁵⁶ Bill Ship, Interview by Clifford Kuhn, April 22, 1987, Politics and the Media, Georgia Government Documentation Program, Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia.

⁵⁷ Vandiver, 25 January 1994.

communication between Connor and the various business leaders.⁵⁸ The lack of correspondence illustrates the gap between the political leadership and business community during the early parts of the 1960s. The situation was furthered complicated by the mayor-council government, which acted along with the commissioner system from 1961-1963. Business leaders also failed to act in school desegregation, and their lack of influence caused another crisis in the city.

The impact of these events on Birmingham and Atlanta were drastic. While Atlanta was generally peaceful, it was still riddled with protests and racial strife that was often hidden from the public view. Birmingham however, was nationally known for its violence towards black citizens. Unfortunately, leaders in both cities failed to address the problem of racial inequality, which has only become more obvious as time has passed. The business communities did not desire to support equal rights, but instead their view was the economic growth of their respective city. The real difference between Atlanta and Birmingham is that Atlanta was more successful in achieving its goals and escaping the violence that engulfed Birmingham.

⁵⁸ Theophilus Eugene “Bull” Connor Papers, 1951; 1959-1963, Birmingham Public Library Digital Collections.

Figure 1 (Based on the 1960 U.S. Census, Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas)

City	Total Population	White Citizens	Black Citizens	Median Household Income
Atlanta	1,017,188	785,019	231,474	\$5,844/year
Birmingham	634,864	415,035	219,542	\$5,103/year

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